

Hard Facts vs Proverbial Truths: The Impact of Arts and Culture on Canadian Citizens and Communities

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On November 20, 2014, the Culture Days, CAPACOA, and the Cultural Knowledge Exchange (CKX) Summit invited Shawn Van Sluys, executive director of Musagetes, and Alain Dubuc, economist and journalist with *La Presse*, to debate the value of the arts. Simon Brault, director of the Canada Council for the Arts, moderated. Shawn argued for the ‘proverbial truths’ or intrinsic value of the arts while Alain argued for the ‘hard facts’ or economic value of the arts. This Oxford-style debate was held at the TIFF Bell Lightbox in Toronto. To watch the video of the debate, visit CultureDays.ca. The Globe and Mail covered the event [here](#).

THE MOTION: "For arts and culture to be fully valued by society, their impact must be demonstrated with hard facts."

Debate questions:

- How can we assess and understand the value and consequent impact of arts and cultural participation on citizens and communities of all sizes across Canada?
- Are the intrinsic and intangible benefits and impacts on the human spirit, creativity, education and other socio-cultural factors the most important to understand? How do we best capture, frame and share these benefits and impacts?
- Or, are the benefits and impacts best served by a deeper understanding of the economic and data-driven metrics of a thriving arts and cultural sector?

Opening Statement

The best way to understand the value of the arts is through experience. We all have experiences of art that affected us. Think about yours while I tell you about one of the most memorable and evocative artistic experiences of my life.

It was a couple of weeks ago. The setting was the sublime Bruce Peninsula where the Niagara Escarpment meets the Georgian Bay and reaches across from Tobermory to Manitoulin Island; where the World Biosphere Reserve reaches from cliffed coves into the rich depths of the lake; where some of the oldest trees in North America still stand; and where Ojibway people have lived for over 7500 years.

Five of us stood at the edge of the Grotto, gazing across the water to Flowerpot Island, a small spot on the horizon. The waves were roiling on that rainy, windy day. The chill cut to the flesh. The greyness of the sky lent a solemnity to our contemplation.

And then, what can only be described as the voice of a volcano sang above the waves and roared against the noise of the wind. The song came here from thousands of miles away and from two hundred years earlier: from the reign of Sunjo, the Korean King at the turn of the 19th century. And now on the shores of Georgian Bay, the sad song of Sim Cheong came alive in the volcanic voice of the great pansori singer, Il-Dong Bae.

Pansori is a form of traditional Korean one-man

opera. To become a master singer, Il-Dong trained with a teacher for 10 years and then to accomplish the height of vocal mastery and oneness with nature that defines pansori, he lived in isolation in the wilderness next to a waterfall for eight years, singing 12 hours per day over the roar of the falls. To be near Il-Dong is to experience complete serenity and to sense deep understanding of the world. He sings songs that express the full range of human emotion: from immense grief to raucous laughter to utter joy and elation, from death to life anew.

I don't speak Korean; I don't understand a single word of it. But to experience the magnificence of his voice and his presence was transformative for me. It was an experience grounded in the contemplation of nature and humanity. I witnessed an expression of beauty that was at once immediately familiar and yet so foreign. That is to say, I witnessed something that twanged chords of thought and emotion in me and will continue to resonate in my ordinary life in ways that I still do not know.

My story of Il-Dong singing at the Bruce and the sad songs he sang there suggest to us the proverbial truths of the arts and culture.

We tell stories to make sense of our world. We evolved from language-less hominins to verbose *homo sapiens* when the first story was told. Perhaps every artistic work is an attempt at retelling that first story, but we know that art—and here's our first proverbial truth—is thinking deeply and beautifully, as the Canadian poet Robert Bringham says. By contemplating nature we see that heat rises, objects fall, solids contain, and so on—such

perception shapes the basic elements of language; we call them metaphors. In the hands of a poet, they become a requiem for a glacier that is dripping its way to extinction—a result of too-great emphasis on hard facts and rational thinking in our society.

Culture is the imaginative capacity of a people manifest in the collective habits of their ordinary lives. Art is the contemplation of it. The word *culture* comes from the Latin *cultus* which was the word for the dwellingplace of a god.¹ The *cultus* is architecture (dolmens, pyramids, mounds, churches, mosques, and so on). It is set apart as a place for contemplation, for memory, for ritual. It is a place to be in awe of the great question of our existence: the ‘why’ of it all. And in that sense, the *cultus*—our culture—is ordinary life. Art is the contemplation of it. The three pre-Hellenistic Muses are present in this: the memory of our stories, the practice of our rituals, and the poetic symbolism of form, movement, sound, and relations.

Whereas the *cultus* of the ancients looked to the gods, the arts and culture today regard the world imaginatively and critically. The only way to understand art is to understand it as the knitting together of our experiences of the world. The philosopher John Dewey compares our understanding of art to our understanding of flowers.² We can *enjoy* the sight and scent of flowers without knowing the interactions between moisture, soil, and light to germinate a seed, but to *understand* the flowers we have to study these interactions. Likewise with art, we can enjoy the beauty of a dance or a painting or a song, but to

fully *understand* the arts we must study the roots and germination of it in everyday experience. And so, art is inquiry and foresight that leads to further possibilities for ourselves and the world. Art disrupts our present to imagine possible futures.

The arts and culture express our human need to be social. Northrop Frye referred to the arts as “the language of humanity.”³ It gives us the capacity to communicate, to tell our stories. Musagetes’ Manifesto says that artistic inspiration “originates in the self, [and] aims to create work that enters the common space of humanity.”⁴ Joe Osawabine, the artistic director of the Debajehmujig Storytellers on Manitoulin Island, says of their theatre company that they make the commitment every day to deepen their relationship with the storyteller within. “As keepers of the stories, our very survival depends on it.”⁵ They travel the world with their stories.

Art is the capacity to experience empathy; it gives us a greater sense of belonging. Whether art brings us together in the making of it or in the enjoyment of it, it gives us a sense of shared social obligation. The sad songs that Il-Dong Bae sang on the shores of Georgian Bay lent me a tacit understanding of a culture thousands of miles away in a language I don’t speak. But the humanity of his art and the emotion in his voice evoked in one moment several millenia of human contemplation of the world.

We fully value the arts and culture only by celebrating the proverbial truths of their imaginative and transformative agency. We must eschew their reduction to hard facts—the products of over-emphasis on rational thinking.

1. Guy Davenport, “The Geography of the Imagination” in *The Guy Davenport Reader*, Counterpoint, 2013, 224.
2. John Dewey, *Art as Experience*, 1934.
3. Northrop Frye, *The Well-Tempered Critic*, Fitzhenry & Whiteside, 1963.
4. www.musagetes.ca/manifesto
5. <http://debaj.ca/content/Artistic-Director>

Arguments against Hard Facts:

On the limitations of research & measurement:

A report from the Arts Council England, released earlier this month, concludes that “while individual experiences are the building blocks of the value system, the literature agrees that cumulative impacts – the effects of a lifetime of involvement in arts and culture – are the fuel for larger societal outcomes.” It’s a great thing that recent research is qualitatively documenting this, but I have to wonder if even sociological research is merely attempting to prove what we already know about the arts from philosophy.

Our society has a tendency to discredit philosophy as a form of research and an expression of wisdom informed by perception of the world. Centuries of philosophy have shaped the proverbial truths by which we now live. Decades before Plato and Aristotle were waxing eloquent, Herakleitos said that “Thinking well is the greatest excellence and wisdom: to act and speak what is true, perceiving things according to their nature.” (from Jan Zwicky’s *Wisdom & Metaphor*). And now, in reports such as the recent one from the Arts Council England, they offer as the question for future research on the individual impacts of the arts: “How much culture is enough to generate individual impacts? Are there impact indicators that ‘are universal to all kinds of cultural experiences?’” Do we really need to survey Canadians to answer this question? By posing such

questions, are we just trying to satisfy the skeptics of philosophy and lived experience rather than accepting research by such thinkers as IA Richards, Wittgenstein, and our own Jan Zwicky.

For example, we can learn much more about how the arts work from this quote by Richards: “Metaphor is the borrowing between and intercourse of *thoughts*, a transaction between contexts. *Thought* is metaphoric, and proceeds by comparison, and the metaphors of language derive therefrom.” The value of the arts can only be experienced and philosophized; it cannot be quantified through the mainstream instruments of sociology and economy that posit such awkward ideas as the possibility of there being ‘enough’ culture that an individual must consume to have the maximum benefit of it. Has our society so fully lost the value of thinking (contemplation) that we have to quantify its benefits through scientific research? And will such research convince our society to revalue it? I think not. We have to create *experiences* of it, partly through cultural mediation. Long before Gilles Deleuze, Herakleitos spoke of the importance of our state of ‘becoming’ rather than ‘being.’

How the arts create a sense of identity in communities:

There are many ways to think about identity. The identity of a community. There is national identity. There is one’s identity as a queer person or person of colour or as part of another marginalized community. And then there are many who have lost their identity as part of the great expulsions of our time, as Saskia Sassen has so brilliantly written

about. But as Alberto Manguel said in his 2007 Massey Lectures: “The language of poetry and stories, which acknowledges the impossibility of naming accurately and definitively, groups us under a common and fluid humanity while granting us, at the same time, self-revelatory identities.”⁶ And on the importance of being social, he writes that “our life is never individual.... It is endlessly enriched by the presence of the other, and consequently impoverished by his absence.”⁷

Closing Statement

Canadian poet Louise Glück wrote that “Art is not a service. Or, rather, it does not serve all people in a standardized way.”⁸ We cannot use the tactics of rational thinking to define imaginative thinking. Only the *experience* of art can show it to us. To find our way out of the crises and malaise that surround us, our society must learn that some things are never wholly quantifiable in hard facts.

The artists’ role is to induce us to continually question our beliefs, enlarge our understanding, overturn our assumptions, and broaden our humanity. Because of that, the arts are continually under attack or usurped by from nefarious forces as extreme as fascism and neoliberalism or as subtle as austerity and back-to-basics fundamentalist economics that we see in so many nations and cities worldwide. No wonder there is a tendency among the art establishment to make its arguments to

government in terms of facts and figures rather than by revealing the great truth that the arts challenge us to think critically—that we should be inquisitive about the shape of the world.

Governments that cut funding don’t do so because they don’t believe in the transformative power of the arts; on the contrary they are keenly aware it. The creation of the Canada Council for the Arts in 1957 was part of the implementation of a post-war strategy to more fully shape a Canadian national identity. The nation was still in the afterglow of its coming-out on the global stage during the liberation of Europe. The Group of Seven artists were internationally celebrated by then and the power of that attention was closely observed by Parliament. So, today, when we are making our case to government, why would we pull out facts and figures rather than stories of collective and individual enrichment?

Art is inquiry and foresight that leads to further possibilities for ourselves and the world.

IA Richards wrote that

“Words are the meeting points at which regions of experience which can never combine in sensation or intuition, come together. They are the occasion and the means of that growth which is the mind’s endless endeavor to order itself. That is why we have language.

It is no mere signalling system. It is the instrument of all our distinctively human development, of everything in which we go beyond the other animals.”⁹

6. Alberto Manguel, “The Voice of Cassandra” in *The City of Words*, House of Anansi Press, 2007, 26.

7. Alberto Manguel, “The Tablets of Gilgamesh” in *The City of Words*, House of Anansi Press, 2007, 34.

8. Quoted by Jan Zwicky in *Wisdom & Metaphor*, Gaspereau, 2005, R8

9. I. A. Richards. *The Philosophy of Rhetoric*. New York: Oxford UP, 1936,1950, 134..

Our world is at risk of becoming increasingly homogenous. The most rigorous study of the loss of languages has shown that we lost 10% of the languages known to have existed. Within the next 10 years, we will lose an additional 10%; 657 languages only have 10 speakers left. Since the 1960s we lost 26 entire language families!¹⁰ Our online world reduces us to rapid consumption of so much junk content, sloganeering, bogus journalism, and rapid social media chatter. Mass media and white-washed entertainment culture is globally ubiquitous. Our immigration policies adopt assimilation. We are, over-time, at risk of losing the cultural heterogeneity that makes our world so vibrant and interesting; Jan Zwicky calls this the “losability of the world.” A big factor in this is the pervasive emphasis on economic measures. The religion of today is the devotion to economics and numbers that give comfort without basis. We see repeatedly that governments and think tanks are capable of finding the “hard facts” to back up any policy that their ideology finds suitable for the day. This is different from evidence-based decision-making that strikes a balance between the time-tested truths of a culture and the qualitative research that describes it.

We live in a global world and this is a good thing. It has vastly increased our capacities for empathy; we understand people who are different from ourselves because our senses, knowledge, and desires have been attuned to embrace these differences as a good in themselves. This is not a result of the dissemination of hard facts and statistics; it’s the result of experience, storytelling, and imagination. As our borders thin and as the world’s cultures mix,

what can be more important to the ‘meeting of the minds’ than the sharing of art and culture? This gives us greater capacity in business, in friendships, and in politics to build the bridges we need for a world that is socially more just, environmentally more resilient, and aesthetically more beautiful.

We fully value the arts and culture only by experiencing and celebrating the proverbial truths of their imaginative and transformative agency. We must eschew their reduction to hard facts—the products of over-emphasis on rational thinking.

10. <http://rosettaproject.org/blog/02013/mar/28/new-estimates-on-rate-of-language-loss/>